

## THE GHETTO IN LUBLIN

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Shortly before the beginning of the Second World War almost 40.000 Jews lived in Lublin. This was one third of the total population of the town, which numbered 120.000 inhabitants. Jewish Lublin was a very important center of religion, education and social life. It is enough to mention that here, in 1930, the most famous yeshiva (rabbinical high school) in the world – Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin (Yeshiva of the Wise Men of Lublin) was established. Before the war, the Jewish community of Lublin had 12 synagogues, about 100 private prayer houses, three cemeteries, a Jewish hospital, an orphanage for children and an old people's shelter. There were many Jewish parties and organizations, which were very active in Lublin. The Jews had their own representation on the Town Council and in many organizations. They also had their own schools, economic and cultural organizations and two newspapers – „Lubliner Tuglat” („Lublin Daily”) and „Lubliner Stimme” („Lublin Voice”), both published in Yiddish. In economic life, Jews were dominant in trade, owning more than 50% of the craft workshops, and about 30% of the factories. The low level of assimilation was unique to Lublin, in comparison to the other large communities. Most of Lublin's Jews were traditional, orthodox people with a very strong Hassidic orientation. Out of 40.000 Jews only about 1000 admitted that they used the Polish language at home, however, most of the younger generation spoke Polish fluently.

German troops entered the town on September 18th 1939, after a short battle in the suburbs of Lublin and several days of bombing. (Many houses in the Old Town and in the Jewish Town were destroyed then, and many Jews who were victims of these air attacks lived in these districts). On the next day, after the arrival of the Wehrmacht units, about 2000 men, Poles and Jews were arrested in the town as hostages. They were released after several days, but on October 14<sup>th</sup>, the Jewish community received an order to pay 300.000 zlotys as a 'contribution' to the German army. German soldiers started to round up the Jews (women and men) in the streets and forced them to work. Many were beaten or tortured. German soldiers robbed many Jewish shops and apartments.

On October 25<sup>th</sup> the Jewish population in Lublin was counted by order of the Germans. This registration showed that 37.054 Jews lived in the town. Some Jews, mostly young people and political activists escaped from Lublin to the Soviet-occupied zone.

The German civil administration in Lublin was organized on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, after the proclamation of the establishment of the Generalgouvernement. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1939 SS-Brigadeführer Odilo Globocnik was appointed by Himmler as SS-und Polizeiführer of the Lublin District. On the same day, the first action of the resettlement of Jews was organized

in Lublin. From early morning, SS-men surrounded the center of the town and evicted all Jews who lived in the central streets. Most of them were rich people, who lost their entire estates within a few minutes. On this day, all the Jews were resettled in the Jewish Town and Old Town. Many of them decided to escape from Lublin.

In November, the German authorities ordered that all Jewish shops, workshops and factories be marked by a Star of David. In December of 1939, there was a new order demanding that all Jews wear, at first, a Star of David on their chest, and then armbands with a Star of David. For many this came as a great shock:

*On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December we were „decorated” by a yellow Star of David. This winter morning Dr Mordechaj Tenenbaum, the old children’s doctor came to work. On his overcoat he had a yellow „patch” and in his eyes, tears. It was horrible, he, who loved every sick child, stood before us and was degraded. He smiled through the tears and in a trembling voice comforted everybody: „It is nothing, my children. We do not have to be shamed – in spite of everything, we are still Jews”.*

The Judenrat (Jewish Council) was established in Lublin at the end of 1939. This institution consisted of 24 members, and was created by the Lublin Jews themselves, after many discussions of whether it would be considered collaboration with the occupiers. The president of the Lublin Judenrat became Ing., architect Henryk Bekker (before the war he was the leader of the Folkspartaj in Lublin, deputy of the Town Council and president of the Jewish Community Council) and there were two vice-presidents of the Judenrat: Dr Marek Alten (lawyer, former Austro-Hungarian officer, one of the leaders of the Zionist Organisation of the town) and Salomon Kestenberk (a famous paper merchant, vice-president of the pre-war Jewish Community Board). About Bekker, all of the survivors of the Lublin ghetto agreed that he was a very kind and helpful person. Opinions regarding the other two weren’t so good - about Alten, especially, about his activities in 1942, people said that it was open collaboration. As well as the Judenrat, other Jewish institutions were established in Lublin, like the Juddische Soziale Selbsthilfe, different committees for the help of the poor and refugees. The Jewish Hospital, the orphanage and the shelter for the elderly were also under the Judenrat’s control. In 1941, when there was a major typhus epidemic in Lublin, a new Jewish Epidemic Hospital was established. This institution was located in the building of the Jewish Culture House, which was to have been opened on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939.

Until March 1941 the Lublin Jews lived in their own apartments (except for the very center of town where they weren’t even allowed to walk in the main street) but they had to work for the Nazis. In December 1939, a Jewish work camp was established at 7 Lipowa St. Although most of the prisoners at this camp from 1940 were Jewish – Polish POWs, a large group of Jewish craftsmen from Lublin had to go there to work. Most of them were the highly skilled. In 1940 the SS organized big ‘razzias’ [aktzias] in Lublin [and the whole Lublin district]

and thousands of the men were sent to Bełżec, to the work camp. Their task was to build the Eastern Wall on the Soviet border. Many of these people died in Bełżec, because the conditions were primitive (at the Lublin State Archive there is a whole list of people who died at the Bełżec work camp in 1940).

Many of Lublin's Jews also had to work for German institutions and companies in the town, and very often Nazis organized 'aktzias' in the streets of the Jewish district to round up people for work. German institutions, Nazi officers and even simple soldiers continued to rob Jewish shops and apartments. In 1940 Nazi propaganda used Lublin for the publication of the several photoreportages about „primitive and traditional Ostjuden”. Here the film „Jud Süß” was made, and Lublin's Jews were used as 'extras'.

When the Germans planned the creation of a „Jewish reservoir” in the Lublin district – in February 1940, 1200 German Jews from Stettin were deported there. Most of them were sent from Lublin to small ghettos in Piaski, Głusk and Bełżyce. They were the first transport of foreign Jews deported to the Lublin district.

In March 1941 the governor of Lublin, Zörner proclaimed the establishment of the ghetto in Lublin. The ghetto included the oldest and poorest part of the historic Jewish district, with the Castle at its centre (during the war, a Gestapo prison) and a small part of the Old Town (Grodzka street where the office of the Judenrat and the Jewish Orphanage were – the building still exists). Several days before the creation of the ghetto, about 14.000 of Lublin's Jews (most of them were the poor people who did not have work in the town) were resettled in small towns in the Lublin district. Some of them returned to Lublin illegally. According to the German order and register, there were officialy about 34.000 Jews left in Lublin. Unofficialy, according to the Statistics Office of the Lublin City Hall, almost 40.000 Jews lived in the town.

Until March 1942, the Lublin ghetto wasn't strictly closed, but Jews were not permitted to be on the so-called „Aryan streets”. But at the same time many Jewish families, especially those who worked as specialists in German institutions, lived outside of the ghetto.

The conditions in the Lublin ghetto, in comparison with the Warsaw or Lodz ghettos weren't too terrible. Many survivors said that here, there wasn't as big a problem with lack of food as in Warsaw. Lublin's Jews still had contact with the world outside the ghetto, so it was possible to smuggle more food here. Even Nazi newspapers wrote about the extensive illegal trade, however most of the Jewish shops were confiscated.

*After my return from Warsaw I realized exactly the differences in the conditions in both ghettos – wrote Sujka Erlichman-Bank – In Lublin there wasn't such an intensive social and cultural life. There were many reasons for this situation. First of all, the Soviet troops who came very close to Lublin at the beginning of the war, facilitating escapes. Mostly the political activists and youth escaped. The large numbers of those resettled from the western part of Poland were deported to Lublin. Most of them were poor people from the low social classes.*

*Intelligentzia, for example from Lodz and its surroundings escaped to Warsaw, believing that the capital city will have a better fate. Lodz`s intelligentzia was very active in Warsaw and replaced the local intelligentzia which escaped. Also the buildings of the two towns were different. The great houses with back-premises, which enabled the gathering of a large number of inhabitants so that some of them could be drawn into the underground and social work during the curfew hours. The buildings in Lublin were smaller and separated from each other, so in the evenings it was impossible to organize meetings. There was the positive side of Lublin also. The misery here was much more „modest” than in Warsaw. Here people didn`t die in the streets. They suffered in silence in their houses or in refugee-shelters or in the hospitals. We can say it was more „decent”. Also Lublin`s nouveau-riches behaved quite decently.*

Until March 1942 many of Warsaw`s Jews escaped to Lublin, believing it to be a „richer” town, with plenty of food. The biggest problems there were the typhus epidemic, overcrowding (people lived even in the shops and in attics) and forced contributions to the Germans.

In Lublin the situation was not the same as in the Warsaw ghetto, where there were many shops, restaurants or workshops for the working Jews, established by German industrial companies like Schultz and Toebbens. The working Jews in Lublin worked mainly for German institutions or the army. In the ghetto there wasn`t even space for the workshops or factories. All the bigger buildings like synagogues were transformed into shelters for refugees or public kitchens for the poor population.

From October 1941, the Nazi administration started to prepare for the total expulsion of the Jewish population from Lublin. According to the report of the German Wohnungsamt, there should be only 25.000 Jews left in Lublin, those who worked for the different institutions, for the army, the SS and the police. Others would be resettled away from the town, but in the autumn of 1941 it wasn`t yet clear where. From December of 1941 groups of young Jewish men from the Lublin ghetto were taken to the concentration camp at Majdanek, for the building of this camp. On the territory of the ghetto there were also small camps for the Jews who did not have work – on Probostwo and Browarna streets. These were the gathering points for those Jews who were sent from there to the camps at Lipowa 7 and Majdanek.

Before the mass resettlement from Lublin, at the beginning of 1942, the Lublin ghetto was divided into two parts: A – the so-called „big ghetto” where most of the Jews who had no work lived; and B – which was only on the several streets, in the „better” part of the ghetto - on Grodzka, Kowalska and Rybna Streets. The officials from the Judenrat and institutions subordinate to the Judenrat, and Jewish workers who worked for the German factories or in the camp at Lipowa 7 lived in Ghetto B. There was a separate block for the doctors from the Jewish hospitals. Ghetto B was surrounded by barbed wire, had its own gates and the inhabitants of both parts of the Jewish district could visit each other only at certain times during the day. They

needed special permission to cross from one side to the other. At the time when the ghetto was divided into two parts, the decision about the deportation of Lublin's Jews to the Bełżec death camp had already been made by Globocnik's headquarters.

Several days before the beginning of the deportations, the SS in Lublin organized the registration of working Jews. Only those who had the stamp given by Sicherheitspolizei on their ID cards, were released from deportation, and they could go to ghetto B. On March 16<sup>th</sup> 1942, several hours before the beginning of the ghetto liquidation, SS-Hauptsturmführer Hermann Höfle from Globocnik's headquarters, organized a meeting with the representatives of all Nazi institutions in the town. During this meeting he announced that all unemployed Jews would be deported to Belzec „which is the last station in the Lublin district” and these people would never return to the Generalgouvernement. “For the working Jews, the SS is building the big camp (Majdanek) which will be the main reservoir of the Jewish labour force for the German factories in the town.” He promised that during the deportation, the SS would be organizing the selections of the people who are able to work.

At 10 o'clock [p.m.] the Lublin ghetto was surrounded by SS and Ukrainians from SS-Wachmannschaften in Trawniki, and the deportation began. The Nazis set a light on the main street in the ghetto and the shocked people were taken out of their homes. Many of them, especially the old and sick, were killed in their houses or in the streets. There was no selection on this day. Two hours after the beginning of the action, SS-Hauptsturmführer Hermann Worthoff from the Lublin Gestapo, who was responsible for Jewish affairs, organized the meeting of the Judenrat. He proclaimed that every day about 1500 people would be deported from Lublin „to the East for work” and every deportee could take 15 kg of luggage, valuables and money with him. At the same time the first group of people was taken to the Great Synagogue, which was transformed into a gathering-point for the deportees. That same night, this group of people had to go onto the Lublin Umschlagplatz, which was near the town slaughterhouse. Early on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1942, the first group of Lublin Jews was deported to the Bełżec death camp. Those left in the ghetto didn't know of the fate of these deportees or the destination of the transports. Only several days after the beginning of the deportations, a young boy (his name is unknown) who escaped from Bełżec, returned to Lublin and tried to explain what happened to the thousands of Jews of Lublin, but nobody wanted to believe him.

Deportations to the Bełżec death camp lasted until April 14<sup>th</sup> 1942. During this time about 26.000 of Lublin's Jews were sent to this camp, about 2500 people were killed on the spot, in Lublin. About 200 children from the Jewish Orphanage were executed together with their teachers in a suburb of Lublin. Several hundred patients with some of the doctors and nurses from the hospitals were shot 15 km. from Lublin, in Niemce forest.

During the „action” in the ghetto, the SS changed the regulations about working Jews. All who worked for the Germans had to change their ID cards into so called „Juden-Ausweis” (J-Ausweis) and only these were exempted from deportation. According to the SS order only 2500 could live in the ghetto officially. On 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1942 Worthoff organized the selection of the Judenrat members and officials. The president of Lublin’s Judenrat Ing. Henryk Bekker and some of the members of this institution (among them was Dr. Josef Siegfried who was the president of Jüddische Soziale Selbsthilfe in Lublin) were deported to Bełzec. Officially, according to Worthoff’s information:

*They will continue to function as leaders of the Judenrat and JSS in the new place of residence, because they have exeperience in this matter.*

Ing. Bekker probably knew the fate of most of Lublin’s Jews, because he went to the train in his traditional Jewish clothes and without any luggage. Together with the Judenrat’s members, 35 Jewish policemen were deported with their families to the death camp. Until this time, these people had participated in the ‘razzias’ on the ghetto streets. Until now many people ask why most of Lublin’s Jews were deported to Bełzec and not to Majdanek. There is a very simple answer – Majdanek was only a concetration camp under construction at the time and there were no gas chambers. Officially only non-working Jews were deported from Lublin, however this wasn’t true right up to the end, and by Globocnik’s order, this group of Jewish victims would also be deported to the Bełzec death camp.

The deportations were stopped on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942. Because the SS knew that there were about 7.000-8.000 Jews trying to hide in the cellars under the old houses in the ghetto, Worthoff and the Gestapo staff responsible for the deportations (Dr. Harry Sturm, Walther Knitzky and Kalich) ordered the transfer of all Jews to the small ghetto, which was organized in a suburb of Lublin, on Majdan Tatarski.

Majdan Tatarski was located in the neighbourhood of the Jewish work camp on Alten Flughafen (the Jews who were in the ghetto observed their brothers who worked on Flugplatz selecting the property of the victims of Aktion „Reinhardt”) and only 1,5 km. from Majdanek concentration camp. According to the German order only those Jews who had „J-Ausweis” could be left in the small ghetto. However, together with „legal” Jews, many „illegal” Jews went to Majdan Tatarski, hoping that they would be „legalized” in the new ghetto. At Majdan Tatarski there wasn’t room for so many people. Before the war about 1500 Polish people had lived here, mainly workers of the aircraft factory Plage-Laskiewicz (during the war Flugplatz). After the first night in the new ghetto, when many of the people had to spend the night on the streets and courtyards because there wasn’t space for so many people, and after the first registration, the SS organized a selection. On April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942 about 2500-3000 people, mostly women and children who didn’t have the „J-Ausweis”, were taken to the concentration camp at Majdanek. After a further selection about 200-300 mostly young men were sent back to Majdan.

The rest were taken 15 km. South of Lublin, to Krepiec forest and were shot there and than. The rumours about this spread quickly in the ghetto and many people lost hope that they could survive. The approximately 4000 remaining Jews of Lublin were left in the ghetto.

After this selection, the ghetto on Majdan Tatarski was organized as a closed ghetto, surrounded by barbed wire. The president of the new Lublin Judenrat was Dr. Marek Alten, but the person who had the biggest influence in the ghetto was really Shama Grajer. Before the war he had been the barber and owner of a brothel in the Old Town. During the war he was the main confidant of the Gestapo in the ghetto. In his restaurant on Lubartowska Street was the „headquarters” for the deportation staff, for which Grajer had the best alcohol and a Jewish musical band. Grajer sold „J-Ausweis” to many people for thousands of zlotys and he participated in the corruption of the SS. On Majdan Tatarski he was called by both the Germans and Jews the „Jewish King”. He participated in the subsequent selections in the small ghetto, deciding who would be selected to Majdanek.

The small ghetto existed until November 9<sup>th</sup> 1942. In September 1942 about 1000 Jews from Majdan were deported to the ghetto in Piaski near Lublin. The next selection was organized on October 24<sup>th</sup>, when a group of Jews from Majdan, among them also some of the so-called „priviledged” Jews (the officials from the ghetto Arbeitsamt and workers from Victor Kremin’s company, who until this time had been exempt from the deportations and selections) were taken to Majdanek concentration camp.

Finally, on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1942, according to Himmler’s order from June of that year, [about the end of the deportations from the ghettos in the Generalgouvernement to the death and concetration camps by the end of December 1942] the last group of about 3000 Jews from Majdan Tatarski was deported to Majdanek. About 180 people were shot in the streets of the ghetto – most of them were children and people who tried to hide in the cellars. Hermann Worthoff personally shot Dr. Marek Alten, Shama Grajer and Moniek Goldfarb, who was the commandant of the Jewish police in the ghetto. They were killed at the personal order of Odilo Globocnik, who ordered that the presidents of Judenrats, commandants of the Jewish police and main confidants should be killed during the liquidation of the ghettos, because they had witnessed the corruption among the SS-men.

The people who were taken to Majdanek were selected – old people and the children were sent to the gas chambers (it was the first selection to the Majdanek gas chambers of the transport in which whole families were sent). Others were left in the camp. After several days, some of Lublin’s Jews were transferred to the other camps in Lublin: on Lipowa 7, on Flugplatz, on Sportplatz or at various small work places where they worked for the SS. Those Lublin Jews who worked as specialists for the Gestapo, were transferred to the Gestapo prison in the Castle, and they worked there as „Hofjuden”, doing private jobs for the officers of the Lublin Gestapo and their families. Some of Lublin’s Jews who survived until November 1943

were executed during the big mass execution of Jewish prisoners, which was organized on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1943 at the Majdanek concentration camp. This execution, the biggest in the history of all the concentration camps, is known also under the name „Erntefest” („Harvest Festival”). On this day, about 18,000 Jews from the different camps in Lublin were executed at Majdanek.

The last group of Lublin Jews, who were in the Gestapo prison in the Castle, survived until July 1944. They were killed on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1944, several hours before the liberation of the town by the Soviets.

Out of the 40.000 Lublin Jews in hiding places and concentration camps, only about 200-300 people survived. A larger group (about 1000 people) survived the war in Russia.

The Lublin ghetto was the first ghetto in the Generalgouvernement, which was liquidated, and from where the first transports were sent to the death camp in Belzec.

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**Sources:**

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